

FBI concludes extended probe into Clinton emails

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8 November 2016

In a brief three-paragraph letter to Congress, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director James Comey announced that the agency had completed its review of newly discovered emails to or from Hillary Clinton and found nothing that would warrant changing its finding, issued last July, that there was no basis for criminal charges to be brought over Clinton's use of a private email server while secretary of state.

The letter, sent to the chairs and ranking members of eight congressional committees, closed the new avenue of investigation Comey had announced on October 28, only 11 days before Election Day. The decision to make public the renewed review of emails was an unprecedented intervention by the FBI into a presidential election.

FBI sources told the press that nearly all of the 650,000 emails found on a laptop belonging to former Representative Anthony Weiner, estranged husband of Clinton aide Huma Abedin, were determined to be duplicates of emails already reviewed by the agency.

Comey's initial announcement of new "investigative steps" in the Clinton email affair was a clear violation of Justice Department guidelines, which bar any public statements likely to be detrimental to a candidate within 60 days of an election. His action was particularly egregious since the FBI had not actually looked at any of the new emails and therefore could not determine whether any of them were relevant to the investigation into Clinton's private server.

The October 28 letter was a factor, along with public reaction to the government's announcement a few days earlier that Obamacare premiums would rise by an average of 25 percent in 2017, in a tightening of the race, with Clinton losing much of her lead over Republican Donald Trump. The November 6 letter is unlikely to have as dramatic an impact. Moreover,

some 30 million people already cast ballots in early voting during the nine days that news broadcasts focused heavily on the renewed email investigation.

Whatever the impact of the Comey letters on the outcome of the presidential election, there is widespread agreement among election analysts that Republican candidates for Senate and House seats, as well as for state governorships, benefited from media headlines about a renewed email scandal and the possible indictment of Clinton or top aides.

In one quarter, however, the second Comey letter was greeted with exuberance—the New York Stock Exchange. Stock prices fell for nine straight trading days after the first Comey letter, in large part due to uncertainty over the outcome of the election and concern that Trump might prevail over Clinton, the favored candidate of the banks, hedge funds and Wall Street as a whole.

On Monday, after Comey's second letter seemingly removed the possibility of legal action against Clinton over the private server, stock prices roared upwards, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average gaining 371 points, one of its best showings of the year. Share prices also advanced significantly in Europe and Asia, in what analysts called a "Clinton relief rally." The US dollar rose on world currency markets and the Mexican peso strengthened against the dollar.

The Trump campaign and congressional Republicans denounced the second Comey letter just as stridently as they had hailed the first one. Trump had praised Comey for reopening the email investigation but told his rallies Monday that Clinton was "being protected by a rigged system."

While Republican critics claimed it was impossible for the FBI to have reviewed 650,000 emails in eight days, FBI officials told the press that the vast majority

of emails recovered from Weiner's laptop were discarded after automated searches determined they were either not to or from Clinton or were duplicates of emails reviewed earlier.

Only a handful of emails had to be examined individually, they said, a fact that underscores the dubious character of Comey's first letter, which presented the emails as a potentially vast trove of new information for the private server investigation.

It is clear from the sequence of events, and from press reports of rifts within the ranks of the FBI, that the agency itself, along with the military-intelligence apparatus as a whole, has significant divisions over the 2016 election. What is most remarkable is that the rival factions within the FBI have sought to directly influence the outcome of the election by releasing investigative materials in a bid to help or harm the Clinton campaign.

Press accounts suggest that the Trump campaign has a direct pipeline to its FBI supporters through former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a longtime federal prosecutor who boasted before the first Comey letter that a major announcement impacting the Clinton campaign was in the works.

Trump referred indirectly to his support within the agency, telling a rally in Sterling Heights, Michigan on Sunday night that the investigations of Clinton "will go on for a long time," and that the "rank and file" of the FBI "won't let her get away with her terrible crimes."

Meanwhile, the traditional function of the FBI in relation to US politics—repressive measures directed against minorities and other groups targeted for attacks on their democratic rights—was in full swing. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported Sunday that the FBI questioned Muslims in at least eight states this weekend on possible Al Qaeda threats to carry out terrorist attacks linked to the elections.

Hassan Shibly, a lawyer and the executive director of the Florida branch of CAIR, said all of the individuals were asked a series of eight questions, including whether they knew the Al Qaeda leaders allegedly killed in US air strikes last month, whether they knew anyone who wished to cause harm to Americans, and so on. Shibly said all the Muslims questioned were of Afghan or Pakistani ancestry. He expressed concern that the FBI actions were part of a pattern of

"intimidating an entire community."

Other states where Muslim Americans were questioned by the FBI last weekend include Pennsylvania, Texas, Oklahoma, California, Washington, Michigan and Kansas. Florida, Pennsylvania and Michigan are all considered "battleground" states in the election, where the turnout of even a few hundred thousand Muslim voters—most likely to vote against Trump—could have a considerable impact. Michigan has the second largest Muslim population of any US state, after California.



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